



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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CHILDREN'S PETS.

BY CAROLINE PRIDHAM.

"Evil is wrought from want of thought,
As well as want of heart."—HOOD.

IN a charming story-book,* which has smoothed the rough road to reading French for many a weary little English scholar, there is a tale which reads suspiciously like an "over true" one, concerning the way in which some tiny fishes belonging to her mother were done to death by the poor little heroine, who was apparently in blissful ignorance of the fact that living things have feelings, more or less acute, even though they be but petted fish living in a glass bowl.

The child had often watched the pretty creatures, admiring their beautiful colours as they darted hither and thither and fought for the crumbs of bread which were thrown to them; she had even been allowed to feed them herself, and all went well until upon an unlucky day her father gave Sophy a dangerous gift—a little knife in a pretty tortoiseshell case.

This knife really was the cause of the particular *malheur* which is related in the chapter called "Les Petits Poissons," and is read with eager interest by little girls who wonder how Sophy could possibly have been so naughty, and yet have a lurking pity for her, and some notion that the same thing might have happened to them.

The story tells how, after she had cut up bread, apples, biscuits—everything she could think of—the bright idea came to Sophy that she should make a salad, for her dolls we may suppose. No sooner had this thought taken possession of her six-year-old head than she ran to ask for some salt. The salad made to her satisfaction, a good deal of the salt was left—what should she do with it?

* "Les Malheurs de Sophie." Par Mme. la Comtesse de Ségur. Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie.

"I only wish I had something to salt," says the lonely child, as she turns the white grains over in her hands. "I can't salt bread. If I only had some meat or some fish! Oh, what a good plan! I will salt mother's pretty little fishes. I can cut some of them in slices with my knife, and salt the rest whole. What a grand dish they will make!"—still intent upon the doll's feast no doubt.

We notice, as the story of the catching and cutting up and salting is told with the detail so dear to a child, that no thought of the pain she was inflicting upon the helpless little fishes, of which she had been so fond, seems ever to have crossed the little girl's mind. There is no shrinking from her task, no sense of horror at what she is doing, until she finds that the poor little victims do not move, and the truth that she has indeed killed them comes home to her.

In an agony of shame and despair Sophy tries to hide—and here she seems gifted with a coolness and *savoir faire* which do not belong to many English children of her age—all traces of her morning's work, in the hope that when her mother comes home she will think that the fishes have fought with and devoured each other until the fate of the Kilkenny cats has overtaken them.

By-and-by, when the weight of her secret is more than the child's heart can bear, we have her confession to her mother, painfully sobbed out:

"I did it, mamma, indeed I did; but I didn't mean to kill your pretty fishes; I only wanted to salt them; I didn't know the salt would do them any harm. I was sure it didn't hurt them when I cut them up, for they didn't cry."

Poor little Sophy! "*They didn't cry*"—there the secret comes out: and who shall say how much torture has been innocently put upon their pets by children who would have stopped in a moment if the tormented creature could but have given some cry—some outward sign intelligible to a child—of the anguish it was suffering at his hands.

Not long ago, a little boy, from his babyhood the devoted friend of all living things, actually drowned a favourite bantam cock by giving it a bath, and then seeing "how long it would stay with its head under water." He came in carrying the dead bird, in great trouble for what he had done, but declaring that he "never knew it was dying" when he held it under the water.

Two little girls, who loved their nursery of guinea-pigs almost as well as their nursery of dolls, made a daily practice of taking them for their morning walk downstairs, persisting in carrying them to the top and making them come down again, although, as the sleek little creatures rolled from stair to stair, their teeth were broken by the fall. "Guinea-pigs' teeth break like *anything*," they would have told you; and the dear pets did not cry more during these painful journeys than at other times; "they were always squealing without being hurt."

And so, if the pet toads or tortoises, white mice or rabbits do not cry, they may still go on suffering at the hands of the children who torment them, not from cruelty, but from the ignorance and thoughtlessness which makes them quite unable to understand the wrong they are doing.

Besides these sins of ignorance, there is in many clever speculative children an innate love of experiment; the same instinct which makes a child do violence to its toys, "just to see whether they will break," will make it do violence to its pets, making them do all sorts of tricks contrary to their nature, or putting them in painful and unnatural situations, "just to see what they will do." Like the boy who throws a cat out of the window nine times, and when, at the tenth, it falls not on its feet, but on its back, and is crushed against the stones, is "very sorry, but thought it would be sure to fall right."

Those who have watched the ways of what are called well-disposed children with animals will remember many instances in point, and will be ready to admit that no creature that lives, and therefore is capable of suffering, should be given over to be the pet—that is, the live toy—of a child, except under careful supervision.

Again, in some children, not otherwise cruel, love of power manifests itself in acts of oppression towards the lower animals; the child exulting in the sense of superiority, and the fact that he can, in some degree, make his pet do what he likes, and, if it is not amenable, can do with it what he pleases. In this case we must plead rather for the child than the animal, for what could be more disastrous to his character than that he should have unlimited control over any helpless, unresisting creature upon which to work his will?

Further, it cannot be denied that, even by a very young child, alas! evil may be wrought towards a defenceless animal, *not* in

ignorance of the suffering entailed, *not* from love of experiment, or even from love of power, but from that "cold and deliberate delight in cruelty" of which Dr. Bain* speaks as "all too frequent, especially in the young," and for which he prescribes "the discipline of consequences" as the most effectual cure.

In view of all these dangers—and that they are not imaginary all who have studied children at their play as well as at their lessons will admit—it may not be amiss to consider the importance of closer attention being paid to what may at first seem a very simple subject, the relations of a child with its pets. Is it too much to ask that those who have the care of young children should watch over them with regard to a matter which may be the source of untold good or of untold harm to the child himself, as well as entail happiness or misery upon the creatures which are given over to him, "for better, for worse"? One or two hints may be given.

Children should be carefully taught their duty to any creature for whose well-being they become responsible, and be shown that, by taking it under their care and making it dependent upon them, they have made themselves responsible for its comfort. They should also have the habits of their pets explained to them, and be encouraged to study them for themselves. Above all, they should be reminded, if they seem to be in danger of forgetting it, that the helpless creatures so absolutely in their power are, as Charlotte Elizabeth's deaf-mute used to say, "*God-mades*;" each bird and beast and creeping thing, wonderfully and exquisitely made by God, each with a little life to be lived in conditions of pleasure or of pain, a life given by Him, which may be taken by some thoughtless act or needless neglect, but can never be restored.

* "Education as a Science," p. 73.